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General debate on national experience in population matters: adolescents and youth

Statement submitted by Advocates for Youth, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.9/2012/2.

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Statement

Advocates for Youth welcomes the theme of "adolescents and youth" for the forty-fifth session of the Commission on Population and Development. With half the world's population under the age of 25, investing in the health and development of the largest generation in history of young people is an urgent priority now more than ever. We would like to take this opportunity to emphasize the importance of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights for all young people and the vital role young people play when meaningfully engaged in all levels of decision-making.

Advocates for Youth recognizes and upholds the right of adolescents and youth around the world to access information and services related to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health. Advocates for Youth respectfully calls upon Governments to fulfil their responsibility to engage adolescents and youth meaningfully and support programmes and policies that enable them to exercise these rights and make responsible decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development recognizes the right of all individuals to decide freely and responsibly on the number, timing and spacing of their children and to have access to the information and means to do so free of discrimination, coercion and violence. Yet more than half the world's youth live in countries with very limited access to sexual and reproductive health-related information and services. Adolescents and youth face particular social, economic, cultural and legal barriers to accessing such services. These unique realities not only increase young people's vulnerability, but also violate their human rights.

Much work remains to adequately address the sexual and reproductive health and rights-related needs of adolescents and youth and to realize the rights espoused at the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994. For example:

- According to the World Health Organization, around the world, 215 million women of reproductive age have an unmet need for contraception and, in some regions of the world, women aged 15 to 19 are two times more likely to have an unmet need for contraception than women in their 20s
- According to the United Nations Population Fund, complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19 in developing countries. The Center for Global Development reports that these young women are twice as likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as those over age 20, while girls under the age of 15 are five times more likely to die than women over age 20
- According to the Population Reference Bureau publication entitled "Unsafe Abortion: Facts and Figures", in developing countries, two in five unsafe abortions occur among women under age 25, and about one in seven women who have an unsafe abortion is under 20
- In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, more than 30 per cent of young women between the ages of 15 and 19 are married, placing them at greater risk of early pregnancy and other sexual and reproductive health issues (see A/61/122/Add.1)

- In its publication "Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: Data and Trends", the Population Reference Bureau reports that between 100 and 140 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation worldwide and 3 million girls are at risk of the procedure each year in Africa
- According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the United Nations Children's Fund, young people worldwide between the ages of 15 and 24 account for 42 per cent of all new HIV infections among people over 15, with young women accounting for 64 per cent of the new infections among youth
- Also according to UNAIDS, globally, only 34 per cent of young people can answer correctly five basic questions about HIV and how to prevent it

Adolescents and youth around the world are facing unintended pregnancy, complications from too-early childbearing, unsafe abortion, harmful traditional practices, HIV infection and gender-based violence. These realities are unacceptable, and adolescents and youth have a right to be healthy and live free from violence and coercion. We demand immediate action in accordance with the recommendations below.

Youth involvement

Ensure that adolescents and youth, including adolescent girls, in and out of school, married, disabled, rural, marginalized, displaced and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, are actively and meaningfully involved at every decision-making level, including in the planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes and policies that impact their lives. In order to be meaningfully engaged, Governments must promote and provide capacity-building opportunities, including financial and technical support that would allow young people to become not only the leaders of tomorrow, but also the leaders of today. In addition to country support for the meaningful engagement of youth, it is also imperative that United Nations agencies, funds and programmes continue to promote meaningful partnerships with youth at the national and international levels.

Comprehensive sexuality education

Provide age-appropriate, medically accurate, evidence- and rights-based comprehensive sexuality education for all in and out of school, disabled and displaced adolescents and youth, with effective referrals to confidential youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services. Sexuality education curricula must promote gender equity, be scientifically sound, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-inclusive. Such curricula must go beyond biology and include information about sexuality; sexual and reproductive health; abstinence; condoms and contraception; healthy relationships; the prevention of gender-based violence, stigma and discrimination; healthy emotive processes; good communication; and human rights.

Comprehensive sexuality education curricula should create safe and judgment-free environments for young people to learn and build their skills to make healthy and informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives. In order to achieve this, Governments must also invest in building a cadre of adequately trained

teachers, provide ongoing technical support on how to deliver high-quality comprehensive sexuality education and evaluate achievement of learning objectives.

Youth-friendly services

Ensure that every young person has access to the full range of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services that are confidential, affordable and respectful of young people's rights to privacy and informed consent. Youth-friendly services must include unconditional access to evidence- and rights-based comprehensive sexuality education and counselling; prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV; a full range of safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of modern contraception and family planning services and commodities, including emergency contraception and male and female condoms; pre- and post-natal care, including skilled birth attendance and emergency obstetric care; and prevention and treatment of gender-based violence and sexual abuse and safe and legal abortion services, including post-abortion care. When designing sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS programmes and services for adolescents and youth, Governments must ensure that they are customized, integrated and based on best practices and young people's expressed needs, especially the needs of young people living with HIV and AIDS. In addition to comprehensive information and services, health professionals working with young people must receive adequate training and support to enable them to provide information and services in a judgment-free environment with full respect for young people's rights to privacy, confidentiality and informed consent. Country Governments must also ensure that communities, parents and guardians are educated and able to provide effective guidance and support to adolescents and youth.

Legal and sociocultural barriers

Ensure that laws, regulations and policies remove obstacles and barriers that infringe on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents and youth. This includes rescinding requirements for parental and spousal notification and/or consent, age of consent, mandatory waiting periods and laws and regulations that permit violence and discrimination against young women and men, married adolescents, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth and other marginalized young people. In addition, Governments should promote policies and programmes that eliminate harmful traditional practices, such as early and forced marriage, rape, gender-based violence, female genital cutting/mutilation and all other forms of violence against adolescent girls and young women.

Youth diversity

Respect the diversity of all young people, and protect and promote their universal human rights and fundamental freedoms regardless of age, race, ethnicity, sex, marital status, sexual orientation and gender identity, HIV status, religious or political affiliation, ability, education level and experience. Promote and support youth-specific research, age- and gender-disaggregated data, and the development of programmes and policies, together with young people, that take the diversity of adolescents and youth into account.

All adolescents and youth have a right to sexual and reproductive health, to live free from violence and coercion and to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights. Youth involvement, comprehensive sexuality education, youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, an enabling legal and sociocultural environment and the recognition of youth diversity are critical to ensuring a world where young people lead healthy lives and where sexuality and reproductive health are positive and enjoyable aspects of being human.